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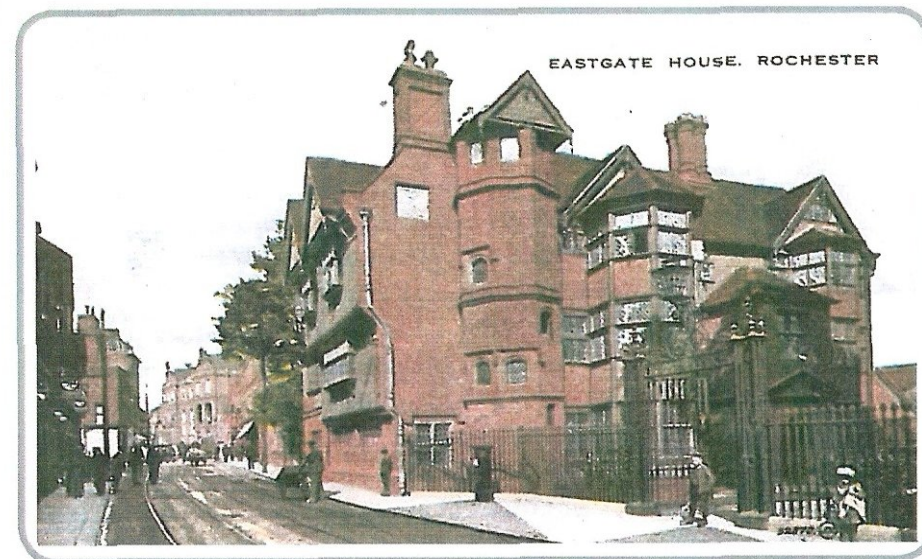
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CHATHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Medway Chronicle

'Keeping Medway's History Alive'



EASTGATE HOUSE, ROCHESTER

Contents

Working Afloat . Isle of Grain . 1953 Floods

CHATHAMSTORICAL SOCIETY

meets at the Lampard Centre, Sallyport
May 9th. Paranormal Kent,
Brompton, on the second Thursday of each
month (excepting January and August).
Hall open at 7-15pm, talks begin at
7.30pm.

Subscription £10 pa. Attendance fee £1,
£3 for visitors.

Good disabled access.

*New members and visitors are most
welcome.*

President. Brian Joyce.

Officers of the Society

Chairman. Barry Meade.

Vice Chair. Len Feist.

Hon. Sec. Sheila Erwin.

Hon. Treasurer. Barry Meade.

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Published by Chatham Historical Society.

The Chronicle is produced with the
financial
support of THE MEDWAY COUNCIL ,
Kent Archaeological Society -Alan
Grove History Fund.

The Society wishes to thank the
contributors and individuals who have
given
their permission to publish family papers.
Postcards are from Brian Joyce's
Collection.

Programme 2013/14

May 9th Paranormal Kent

Neil Arnold.

June 13th. Chatham Traction

Richard Bourne.

July 11th. Lost Empires of

Variety & Music Halls.

Wilf Lower.

August 8th. No Meeting.

September 12th. Women's

Land Army. Dr. Ann Kief.

October 10th. Historic buildings

Of Kent. David Carder.

November 14th. Fort Amherst.

Dana Adler.

December 12th.

Society Xmas Evening.

January No Meeting.

February 13th. Bishop Gundulph.

David Gutteridge.

March 13th. Flanders Fields.

Melanie Barton Gibson.

April 2014 AGM

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Printed by A&T
TECHNICAL SUPPLIES.
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The Society's new venue.

It was a shock to learn, last October, that the Society
could no longer use the Royal Engineers Church Hall in
Maxwell Road, Brompton, from March 15th 2013, for our
meetings. We were having trouble finding a new home
which would be available on the second Thursday of the
month, and which also had a kitchen.

However, we were offered accommodation in the Royal
Engineer's new Lampard building, situated on The
Sallyport at Brompton. Sallyport is the first turning left
on Mansion Row and is even nearer to Dock Road than
the Church hall. The Lampard Centre is the new building
on the right as you enter Sallyport.

We had our first meeting there on the 14th March and
thoroughly enjoyed our new home. Everything is brand
new and we were made very welcome.

The programme of meetings is on the Index page.

Visitors and new Members are very welcome.

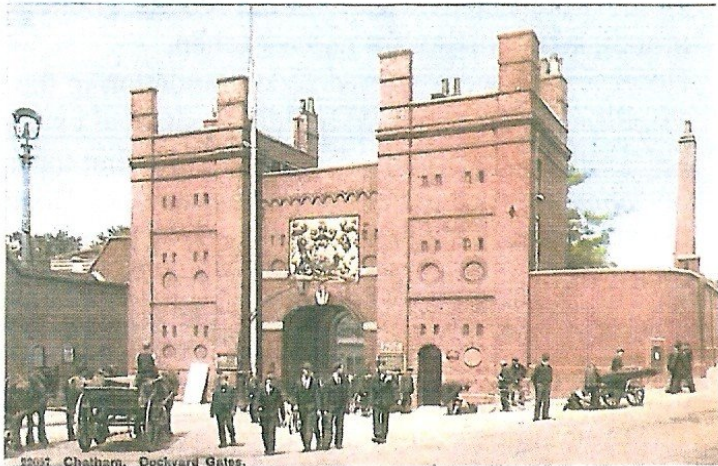
SCHOOL NEWS

A number of pupils from the Robert Napier School,
(our Corporate Member) attended the Society's October
meeting to hear Ian Porter's talk entitled 'Suffragettes'.
It was very pleasing to see these young people studiously
making notes, and we hope that this bodes well for the
the high standard of entries for the Society's History
Prize this year.

Sheila Erwin
Hon. Sec.

WORKING AFLOAT in the 1950s

by the late Peter Lewis.



In the 1950s Chatham Dockyard employed approximately 9,000 people in a wide variety of trades and employments. They worked in offices, stores, workshops, canteens, on dockyard maintenance and some afloat.

Working afloat meant actually working aboard surface craft or submarines that were either being built or refitted.

At a quarter to seven or thereabouts, on a weekday morning in the 1950s, the roads to the Dockyard Yard were crammed with bicycles, together with a few motor cycles and cars and, of course, a fleet of buses, all heading towards the Dockyard gates. The bicycles were of every age, type and description. There were flashy new ones with a

multiplicity of gears, sturdy reliable ones and decrepit old ones held together with pieces of wire and string. In those days the bicycle was not only the main means of getting to the yard, but was also the most convenient method of getting around inside the establishment.

As seven o'clock approached the traffic gathered momentum until at about two minutes to seven, Dock Road resembled the final stages of the "Tour de France" race. Anyone even one minute late at their clocking station lost a quarter of an hour's pay.

Once through the gates the streams of traffic divided, everyone going to their particular place of work. Afloat hands went to grey painted clocking huts situated in various places around the docks or basin sides in the vicinity of the vessels on which the men were working. Each clocking station was manned by a Recorder whose job it was to control the clocking-in in progress and to ensure that nobody clocked a card other than his own.

Having clocked-in, afloat hands made their way on board their vessel, usually gathering in small groups either in empty compartments or in some convenient corner where they could store their tool boxes and "Brewing-up" equipment. These areas were known as "hangouts" and were fiercely defended against intruders.

If there were no chargemen or inspectors around, many would brew tea in blackened "boiling-up" pots, either by suspending the water filled pots over

rivet fires or by heating them on scarcely protected electric fire elements plugged into any convenient power source. In either case the resultant brew was an evil looking liquid, which could double as a paint stripper.

Most pots were made of copper and tinned on the inside. These pots could be purchased from the Coppersmiths workshop for two shillings and sixpence. Nobody enquired as to the source of the raw materials from which these were made!

Overalls were donned and cold weather "Fearnought" coats added over the top of the overalls. These coats were a Dockyard issue and were of thick white blanket-like material. They were very warm, but soaked up water like a sponge. Once they were wet they tended to stay that way, as there were few drying facilities available.

Suitably attired, the hands commenced work and the ship became a hive of activity. Rivet guns and pneumatic chisels would start up, making noises reminiscent of the barrage at El Alamein. Welders struck their arcs, sending showers of molten metal pieces all around and producing acrid smoke, which drifted everywhere. Men pushed past each other in gangways, bearing lengths of piping, cables trunking and other miscellaneous items. There were cables to fall over, holes in the deck to be avoided, low pipes or valves on which to hit your head. In those days no special headgear was worn. The day of the plastic helmet had not yet

arrived. Most people wore flat caps or berets, which afforded some small protection from falling debris and welding sparks. The wearing of shoes or boots with reinforced toecaps was encouraged. These were called "Toetectors" but they had to be bought, so most people did not bother.

Unless the ship was still commissioned, (still manned by the Navy) there would be no heating on board. There was no minimum working temperature afloat, as there was in some of the workshops. Cold weather, combined with other discomforts, made life distinctly uncomfortable during winter months.

Lavatory and washing facilities around the Yard for afloat workers were fairly basic. Apart from some places on the docksides for the use of ship crews, the rest were built in the 19th century. One rather splendid new lavatory was built in the late 1950s by the side of No.3 basin, which when opened attracted considerable attention.

On larger refits there would be no mains power on board and work had to be carried on in light provided by a 110v temporary lighting system which was strung up throughout the ship.

At nine o'clock each morning the hooter would sound to signal an official break time of 20 minutes. Work stopped, tea was brewed and sandwiches eaten. During this time many discussions would take place. Topics would

include Gillingham Football Team, racing results, politics, religion and the general state of the world. At nine-twenty the hooter sounded again and work recommenced, until 12 o'clock when the hooter signalled the dinner break for one hour and the men clocked off.



Going to Dinner.

Chatham Dockyard.

Some would go to one of the Dockyard canteens for a hot meal, others brought sandwiches and ate them on board or in one of the tool-box sheds, which were scattered around the yard. A few who lived nearby would go home.

At one o'clock the hooter sounded again, men clock-on and resumed work.

At five o'clock (four o'clock on Fridays) the hooter sounded and men who were not working over-time or had "time-in-lieu" clocked off and made a concerted rush to one of the Dockyard gates. Men passing through the Dockyard Gates would be scrutinised by eagle-eyed Dockyard

Police. Every so often someone would be stopped and searched. Anyone found in possession of Dockyard stores faced prosecution and dismissal. However, it must be said that despite these precautions a certain amount of Government property still disappeared without trace.

Once again Dock Road was filled with bicycles. The confusion had to be seen to be believed. Many buses would be parked in the section of Dock Road from Brompton to Pembroke Gate ready to carry Dockyardmen (and Sailors) to all parts of the Medway Towns and further afield.

So ended the day and relative peace settled over the Yard. There were usually a few unfortunate (or fortunate) souls working overtime till eight o'clock. The hooter stayed silent until seven o'clock the following morning when the whole cycle started again.



Pay day.

Chatham Dockyard

Reproduced by permission of Mrs.P.Lewis & Chatham Dockyard Historical Society.

THE MEDWAY TOWNS AND THE FLOODS OF 1953

By Brian Joyce

The east coast floods, which struck during the Saturday night of 31 January-1st February 1953, were caused by the fatal combination of a high spring tide and exceptionally strong winds. They killed 300 British people from Scotland to Essex. Kent escaped the worst of the devastation, but even so, there was widespread damage.

Low-lying parts of the Medway Towns flooded as they then did during very high tides, but this time it was worse than usual. In Military Road in Chatham, the cellars of the Eagle and the Two Brothers had to be pumped out. At the premises of W Cooper (Hammersmith) Ltd, £1000 worth of clothing was damaged. The Kings Arms in Medway Street was inundated, together with Russell's Garage and the premises of Arthur Gamman.

The Homeward Bound pub in Gas House Lane Rochester was accessible only by rowing boat for a time. Water poured across Corporation Street and up Blue Boar and Free School Lanes.

The inhabitants of Strood were used to flooding and were unsurprised when homes and businesses in Canal Road were overwhelmed. The water reached the tops of shop and pub counters. Strood High Street was under three feet of water until the tide receded.

Residents of houses in Pier Road Gillingham escaped upstairs as water flooded in. Autoyachts marine engineers had been built above the previous record tide level, but was still under an inch of water. Neighbouring premises such as WC Allan's and Parham's were also immersed. Store rooms at Novadel chemical manufacturers were flooded and raw materials and finished products ruined.

At Lower Rainham, Motney Hill sewage works were isolated for a time when the sea wall was breached. Residents of some Motney Hill Road homes had to be aided by neighbours who swam and waded to their rescue.

The Hoo peninsula suffered more than the Towns themselves. Water surged across the marshes and for a while the Medway and Thames were joined, cutting off the Isle of Grain and its nearly-completed oil refinery. Rail lines were washed away and telephone, electricity and water services disrupted. Police boats supplied isolated communities with bread and milk until high-axled lorries could make their way into Grain and Stoke villages.

But it was the Isle of Sheppey and its 25000 inhabitants which suffered most in North Kent. The sea wall was breached in several places and a tidal wave swept into central Sheerness. Telephones, electricity and water supplies were cut off. Loudspeaker vans warned residents to conserve and boil what water they had. Sheerness railway station was under water and firemen had to pump out the telephone exchange, electricity sub-stations and the gas works. Royal Engineers were drafted in to temporarily sandbag the sea wall.

A coach bound for Sheerness left London at 11.35pm on the Saturday. It reached King's ferry at 1.30am, where the driver turned back. He only got 150 yards before his vehicle was immobilised by flood water. The terrified passengers were trapped inside for a further seven hours, shouting and blowing whistles to attract attention while the water rose four feet inside the coach. Eventually, soldiers arrived in amphibious vehicles and got them away.

At Sheerness Dockyard, the submarine HMS Sirdar was in dry dock with wooden staging round it. As the tide surged over the sea defences, the vessel filled and capsized and sank in 36 feet of water.

In the adjoining dry dock, the frigate HMS Berkeley Castle was lifted in the air by the force of the water and then fell on her side over the dock wall.

Vessels of all descriptions – motor launches, harbour craft, fishing vessels and so on evacuated vulnerable people and delivered food, milk, newspapers, mail and emergency clothing to the embattled islanders.

It took weeks for Sheppey to return to near-normal conditions and much longer than that to strengthen sea defences long-term.

Despite all this chaos, it is well to remember that North Kent was affected relatively lightly. In Canvey Island's bungalow community, 58 people drowned, often as they slept, and in the Netherlands, nearly 2000 perished.



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River Reflections

BARGES

by Jack Lacey.

Skipper Alan Jenner's strong sense of priorities developed from his training under that doyen of latter-day skippers Alec Rands of the *Cabby*, which kept her sailing gear until well into the 1960s.



Members of the Chatham Dockyard Historical Society enjoy a trip on the *Cabby*.

Personal comfort and whim always fell before getting the barge, cargo intact, to its destination with the minimum delay and the greatest fuel-saving efficiency (crews of barges paid by the share were obliged to pay for fuel themselves). Rands was very strict about scrubbing and cleaning, the slightest omission called for the whole to be done again, even for failing to polish the thumb wheel controlling the wicks of the oil-lamps. Later this well taught lesson on attention to detail led Jenner into conflict with his employers who, he reasoned, ought to maintain their equipment with the same dedication to safe and good running as he put into his side of the bargain.

The *Flagon*, in which Jenner spent some years, was a former *Gallipoli* landing barge. Her owner the late Albert Rutland was a small fleet owner and highly skilled at keeping his vessels afloat in the most economical way!

The vessel had an ancient Ruston 120h.p. engine of the dry-sump variety. There was no oil gauge so Alan, at his own expense, fitted one with an indicator in the wheelhouse. One night proceeding from Halling to Tilbury with a cargo of cement (for a deep-sea vessel sailing on the next tide) the familiar note of the Ruston changed dramatically. A glance at the dial and a quick dive into the engine-room revealed an empty header tank, an empty sump and a broken feed pipe. A length of old searchlight cable was found from the "spares" in the smoke filled engine room. This was stripped and the copper wire used to bind up the pipe to a leak proof joint. The vessel had drifted with the tide but was soon under command again.

Arriving late at Tilbury (though in time to unload) Alan phoned to report to Albert, who expressed complete satisfaction, though the pipe was not properly repaired for

another eighteen months. The compass was another problem, being sluggish and inaccurate.

Trade had begun to fall off in the late 'seventies' and continued so into the 'eighties'. The crews were paid a modest fall-back pay as they swung at the moorings and maintained the craft while awaiting a cargo.

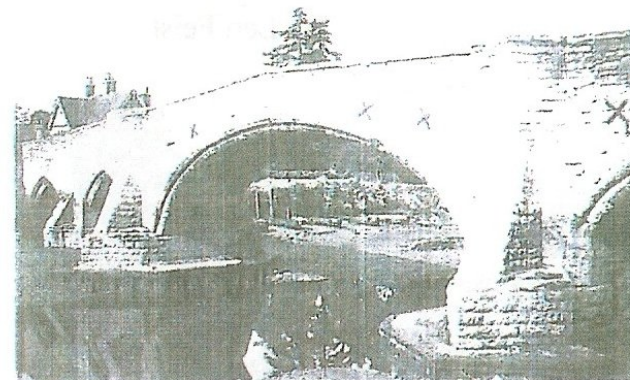
One day Albert boarded with a broad smile and said "Well Alan, and what have you done today to earn your fall-back? Albert was a man not easily surprised.

"I arranged a compass-adjuster, took her down to Long Reach and swung the compass and she's perfect now!" Albert was temporarily rendered speechless.

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Well before the decline in trade which brought opportunity for skippers to buy their own barges, Bill Mulock, a master carpenter by trade, fell in with Albert Hutson and in due course Albert sold Bill the steel motor barge *Niagra* built as a sailing barge in 1898. In 1970, skippered by Bill, she left London for Tovil with a hundred bales of woodpulp topped with bales of coir yarn. At New Hythe she touched a horizontal protrusion on the rudder of a vessel lying outside the permitted extremity from the wharf. She began to settle, but craft normally sit deeper in fresh water than salt, and it was not until she passed Aylesford Bridge that the mate, coming aft with a cup of tea, found himself paddling in water up to his ankles, and raised the alarm.

The skipper made an attempt to shunt her into the nearby Forstal Timber Dock but she grounded just above and about a mile down stream of Allington Lock.



Low-water at Aylesford Bridge.

My telephone rang about midnight on a dark, brisk and a fitfully moonlit night. I drove out from Rochester and picked my way along the towpath to find *Niagara*, brightly illuminated as the clouds momentarily cleared the moon. She made a dramatically beautiful sight with the heavy flow from the open sluice gates washing over her stern. The barge lay athwart the stream, her bow high on the left looking for all the world as though a giant hand had put her there. I went back to the lock and the keeper eased the sluices so that she lay better. Next day the late George Philpott and his team from Medway Ports Authority pumped her out, and removed a few bales to get to the eighteen-inch slit in her side. They bored, bolted and placed a rubber backed plate into place and floated her on the next tide! She continued to trade for some years.

THE ISLE OF GRAIN.

By Len Feist



The Church in 1901

As the name suggests, and Yantlet Creek bears witness, Grain was separate from Kent.

It was part of the Tithe, with Gillingham, under authority of the Nunnery of Minster on the Isle of Sheppey.

It is a bit wind swept to say the least but in early times fishing was good and farming was, and still is.

It was a small community for centuries but enough for a church to be built for its spiritual needs. Indeed it is fairly certain that the first church was a small Saxon one, and later, after the Normans conquered, a stone one was erected. The church itself has been altered over the later years.

It was reported that people living there seemed friendly and happy enough with their lives. I am sure they were careful with their words as smuggling was a pastime, for in those days a few goods at a reasonable price helped towards a better life.

With the advent of Henry VIII changes in the rules regarding the church's authority meant that the lands he took over were used as gifts for favours and assistance received, and so passed into the hands of many owners.

The churches themselves remained in the hands of the Church Commission.

The climate conditions were pretty much the same as reported in previous articles on Stoke and Hoo.

Marsh and water made good breeding ground for knats.

The ague, or marsh fever, made it quite a distressing time for those of poor health. Being an island it was of course not immune to being flooded on numerous occasions, to the distress of the poor inhabitants.

There are many interesting artefacts within the church and of course numerous stories, one of which relates to the church door. It would appear that during the raid by the Dutch Fleet on Sheerness and the Medway in 1667, the church was attacked and, of course, the door was damaged. The story tells how someone of high rank got to learn of this and ordered that the door be repaired.

The repair can still be seen where lighter coloured wood has been used.



Inns have, of course, played a part in villages just as they have in towns and cities.

The Cock Inn is of early date. It was purchased by the Hulkes family who were brewers in Chatham, and held by them for many years. The family was also land owners and agents in Strood.



The Cock Inn. The building next door was the Cat & Cracker which later became the Post Office And General Store. Note the invalid car outside The Cock Inn

Further spiritual guidance was given in the 1800s by the erection of a Bethel Chapel. It is recorded that as many as 60 children attended Sunday School and that Teachers and Preachers crossed from Sheerness to perform these duties.

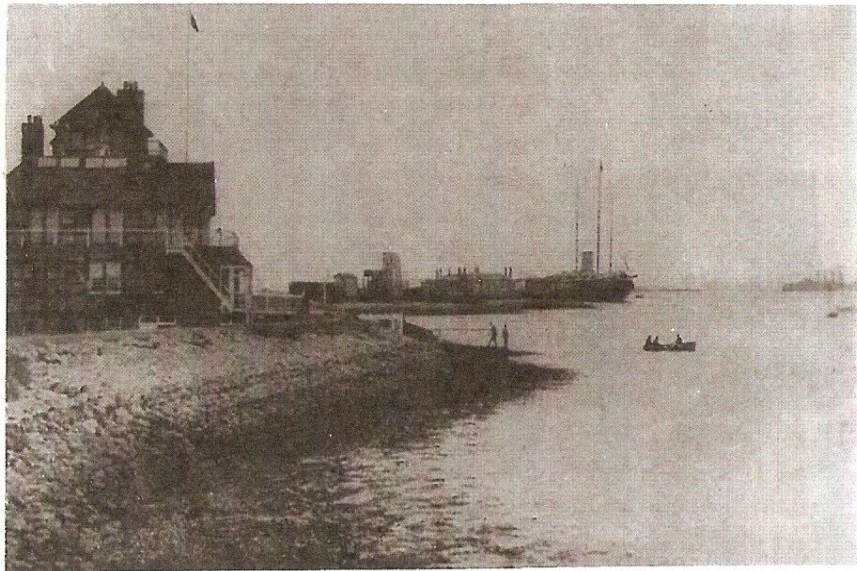
A school was erected half way through the 1800s and it is recorded that in 1903 the attendance was 72 and in 1904 it had risen to 94, with an average attendance of 81. It was a mixed school, as in many other villages, and run by a mistress and an assistant.



The Church and School along with the children after the Alterations.

Grain Fort was built in conjunction with Slough (Allhallows), and Sheerness to protect the entrance of the Medway and Thames. The building of the fort began the change in the area from just farming. The railway, Port Victoria, the Yacht Club and, of course, the Power Station meant work for the locals became more varied, but not for all.

The island backwater has seen great change, some say not for the better, others say more about its progress, or maybe like earlier folk of this place should we be happy with our little lot!



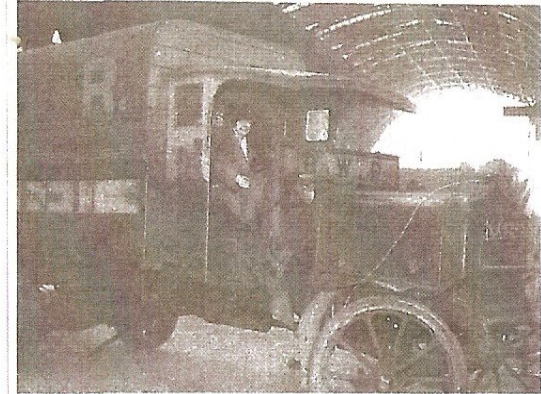
The Yacht Club in the foreground. Port Victoria with Queen Victoria's Royal Yacht moored alongside.

THE 1926 GENERAL STRIKE and its EFFECT ON THE MEDWAY TOWNS.

By Sheila Erwin.

When the General Strike was called on Monday May 3rd 1926 negotiations between the Miner's Executive and the Trade Union Congress on one part, and the Cabinet on the other, had broken down.

It was generally considered by writers and commentators at the time to be the greatest single outburst of class conflict. It was an exception to the normal moderation of the British working-class movement.



A lady volunteer transport driver during the Strike. *Radio Times Hulton Picture Library*

Country wide the effects were immediately felt. In towns and cities people first noticed the peace and quiet in the streets. Few trains, buses or trams were running: no hustle and bustle of the working morning. Docks, power stations, furnaces all were quiet. National newspapers closed down and the BBC broadcasts were the only way people could keep abreast of events.

The impact on those living in towns and villages in the South and West was less. There was no strong feeling in these places, which were little touched by industry. However, the Medway Towns were an exception having, apart from the Dockyard, a number of other large

concerns, such as Aveling and Porter, Short Brothers, Portland Cement, etc. as well as busy river traffic.

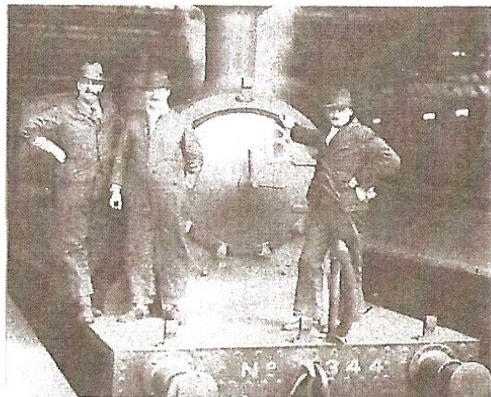
On that Tuesday morning in the Towns few people were about. Navy leave had been cancelled. Chatham and District trams and the Southern Railway passenger trains had ceased running, but the Maidstone & District and other buses still ran, with the M & D displaying the apt advertisement "Take Bovril & Walk"!

Factories and crews of barges and lighters, and loading gangs were on strike. Those not in the Trades Union continued to work.

The Chatham Mayor, Councillor R. Wildfred, became Chairman of a committee to recruit volunteers to help maintain food, fuel, light and power and over 300 Chatham men and women offered their services. It was not thought necessary at that time to mobilize the force of special constables.

In Rochester over 400 enrolled at the Office of the Secretary of the Voluntary Emergency Committee.

Volunteers all over the country joined to keep transport and other essentials moving.



The London Daily newspapers ceased publication on Tuesday but on Wednesday a Paris edition of a London

daily was on sale, and supplies of the British Gazette were brought to the Medway Towns "by two women in a motor car". In the evening, parcels of the Paris edition of the Daily Mail were dropped in Chatham from an aeroplane!

The Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News was not forced to close down. It announced, under a heading:

The News and the Crisis

"This paper will continue to be published as long as circumstances permit. Our intention is to rigidly adhere to facts, to express no opinion as to the pros and cons of either side; and not to report matters of hearsay".

The Post Office authorities at Chatham appealed to the public to refrain from using the postal, telegraph and telephone services unless absolutely necessary.

In Rochester the authorities stated that at that time there was no danger of food, coal or light shortage or of the immediate necessities of life. So far none of the public health services had been affected. All coal supplies to the factories had been cut off but residents were assured that work would continue while supplies lasted.

In anticipation of the loss of power residents were stocking up with candles.

Trade Unionists at Short Bros., Aveling and Porter and other large firms were on strike but those who were not trades unionists continued to work. All transport workers, including the crews of barges, lighters, loading gangs stopped work on Tuesday morning.

THE CHATHAM and DISTRICT LIGHT RAILWAYS Co.

The Company begs to intimate that due to their Employees having, according to instruction from Union Headquarters, declared a strike in sympathy with the Miners, the Service of Cars is temporarily suspended.

The Company regrets the unavoidable inconvenience to the travelling Public, and trust their support will again be extended to them when the present difficulty is overcome.

A curious feature of the strike was the almost entire absence of street accidents, which, in view of the increase in vehicular traffic was most unexpected, and was put down to the control exercised by the police. The small motor buses, which still continued to serve various routes in the Medway Towns, reaped their own reward.

Hundreds of motor lorries marked "Food Supply Only", passed through Rochester High Street.

Cycle factories were working very hard to keep up with a great increase in demand. Many retailers had sold out of stock. Motor cycles sales were said to have doubled.

The Ministry of Transport's return of the number of motor vehicles and private cars licensed showed a marked increase over those licensed in 1925:

	1913	1921	31 May 1926
Private cars	109	243	627
Motor cycles	100	336	586

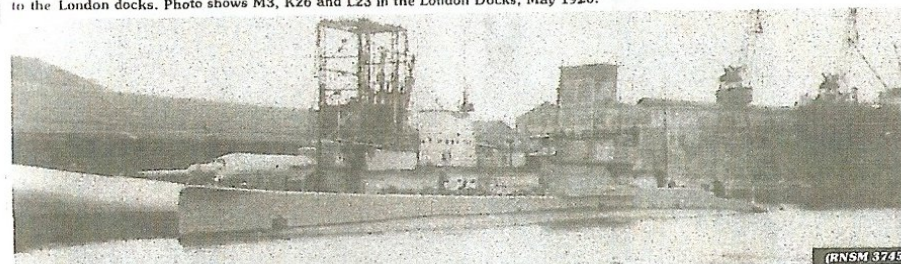
On Saturday 8th May. some of the men engaged on a local main drainage scheme ceased to work due to materials being held up, and Wickham Cement Works closed down due to lack of supplies of coal, so 350 more men were added to the list of the unemployed. By common consent there was no overtime worked at Short Bros by men who continued to work, but on Wednesday more men from the joiners, saw mills and painters shops joined the strike. A strong force of pickets had been been at the works but, it was reported that "there was a friendly spirit between non-strikers and strikers".

At a meeting of local Tramwaymen on Tuesday morning, it was decided unanimously to come out, proceedings were closed with the singing of the National Anthem.

Early on Wednesday morning railway workers held a meeting on the Rochester Esplanade.

On the following Tuesday evening members of the A.E.U working at Aveling & Porter stopped work, on orders from their union.

Below: Operation Blackcurrent. During the National Strike of 1926 RN submarines were used to supply essential electrical power to the London docks. Photo shows M3, K26 and L23 in the London Docks, May 1926.



Officers and men of the R.N. Depot Chatham played a large part in assisting essential services to keep going and it was stated at the time that their efforts would "never be fully told." For instance: Operation Blackcurrent involved sending three RN submarines, M3, K26 and L.23, to London Docks where they supplied essential electrical power.

Seamen were despatched to ports and places in all parts of the country. Many were employed at the London Docks, at Tilbury and at other ports.

Some women had disapproved of the strike. Men called out had difficulty at home. One woman was quoted as saying "If you strike, I strike, it will be no use you coming home for meals because I shan't get them for you". It is believed that that man remained at work.

The General Strike, despite the general disruption and anxiety caused, did not last a week.



Undergraduate volunteers in Fair Isle jerseys and plus-fours operating the signal box at Bletchley station. Illustrated London News

To be continued....The Aftermath.